

STRAIGHT TALK: NETANYAHU'S RESPONSE TO OBAMA

Gerald Steinberg

June 14 2009

In his Bar Ilan University speech, Prime Minister Netanyahu accepted President Obama's challenge of frank talk between allies. Before Mr. Netanyahu said yes to the possibility of a Palestinian state at the end of a realistic peace process, he spoke about the roots of the conflict and the narrative, and on these issues, more than anything other, he differed from Obama's Cairo University speech. The conflict, he reminded Washington (and Europe), did not result from the 1967 war, but rather from the intense, consistent and often violent Arab refusal to acknowledge Israel as the ancient homeland of the Jewish people, and to the Jewish right to self-determination in this homeland.

On this fundamental requirement for mutual acceptance, Palestinian leaders continue to maintain the old rejectionist stance. Netanyahu reminded Obama as well as his Israeli critics that even the most moderate Palestinians have been unwilling to acknowledge the Jewish historical roots in this land. Unless this obstacle is overcome, Netanyahu emphasized repeatedly, there was no realistic possibility for a stable and lasting peace agreement.

Similarly, in contrast to Obama's emphasis on Jewish suffering and the Holocaust, both in Cairo and then in Buchenwald with Elie Wiesel, Netanyahu replied that Israel was founded on the basis of historic and political rights, and not in response to antisemitism and suffering. The history of 2000 years of political powerlessness and persecution served to highlight the need for restoration of Jewish self-determination. In the strongest line of the speech, Netanyahu declared that had Israel come into existence earlier, the tragedy of the Holocaust would have been averted. What went unsaid was the degree to which Obama's misplaced emphasis reinforced the Arab narrative in which the creation of Israel resulted from European guilt.

As part of this frank talk, Netanyahu told his audience – Israelis, Americans, and Arabs -- that in order to make progress towards a two state solution, the legitimacy of the Jewish state will have to be explicitly recognized. In addition, everyone would need to recognize that the problem of Palestinian refugees created by the 1948 war would have to be solved outside of Israel's borders, in contrast to the continued effort to use them to change Israeli demography.

Just as Israel had absorbed mass of Jewish refugees from Arab lands – their numbers were roughly equal to the Palestinian refugees – and despite the economic difficulties of this process, the Arab states and the world would need to do the same. Without finding a solution to the refugee issue outside Israeli borders, there is no foundation for a stable peace agreement.

Netanyahu also spoke frankly to his Israeli constituents – the voters for Likud and the other coalition partners that recently returned him to the position of Prime Minister. The

taboo on a Palestinian state in any form was broken – the international (meaning primarily American) situation required recognition of this reality. The Palestinians were entitled to their own flag, anthem, and country.

Thus, the issue which ostensibly led to the failure of post-election negotiations with Tzippi Livni and Kadima for a broad coalition government suddenly disappeared. And while Netanyahu called for American and international guarantees that a Palestinian state would be demilitarized, in practice, this will be difficult to ensure, as events in Gaza have demonstrated.

Overall, in this speech, the Prime Minister went somewhat further than both his critics and his supporters should have expected, including acceptance of a settlement freeze, at least with respect to additional territory. On Jerusalem, no new ground was broken, as Netanyahu declared that the city would not be divided, and that the members of all religions would continue to be able to pray at their holy sites. Obama's speech also treated Jerusalem carefully and without details, suggesting agreement (either tacit or explicit) that negotiations on this very complex issue should be left for later.

But this is only an opening position in what all sides recognize will be a difficult negotiation process, primarily between Obama and Netanyahu, and also between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. With the big speeches behind them, both leaders will now have to work on the much more difficult task of translating noble words into successful policies.